

Introduction
Women Researchers of Color:
Have We Come a Long Way?

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One of the most vivid memories of Olga Welch's childhood is standing in line at the World's Fair in Montreal, Canada waiting to see Michelangelo's *Pieta*. As she and her family proceeded to the rear of the line, she was overwhelmed with the sheer number of people awaiting their opportunity to view this masterpiece. The estimated wait time posted was three hours. Finally, reaching the rear of the line, she remembered thinking that they would NEVER reach the exhibit. She expressed this feeling to her father who used the moment to teach her, what he called "the line principle." After waiting approximately 15 minutes, her father asked her to look behind her. Where they had once stood, there were at least 60 people. Her father turned to her and said, "Once *you* were *there* and now *you* are *here*. Never measure your progress by how far you have to go but always by *how far you have come*."

Although not a new concept, this line principle seemed especially apropos as we prepared this volume. In a real sense, as women researchers of color, we have come a long way. And yet, as we reflect on that journey, we are forced to ask ourselves at what cost have our epistemological stances evolved? This question represents the central focus of this book. In it, women researchers of color examine their place in the line of research dialogues in their own disciplines and through the lenses of their particular epistemological and ontological perspectives. They engage in this activity from a circumscribed position—the margins they intentionally represent as a place of resistance and reclamation.

As hooks (1990) states:

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site or resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility (p. 53).

The radical openness and possibility of which hooks speaks is what this book explores—not just for women of color, but also for the White woman researcher, who uses her position in the center to propose an alternative and inclusive research epistemology that promotes the agency of the margins for the knowledge construction of women of color.

What makes this discourse so important is its timeliness, as the primary role of research in academe remains uncontested. Indeed, institutions of higher education earn their rankings based on research reputations that are grounded in the scholarship of their faculty. Given the primacy of these research endeavors, it is not surprising that tensions have emerged. A major source of tension comes from the entry into academe of researchers who bring new and different experiences and worldviews.

Moreover, when the newcomers are those who represent the Other (i.e. those who are not part of the White male group who have traditionally dominated educational research), another source of tension concerns equity. In educational research, particularly, issues of equity are not only issues of practical application within institutions of higher education, such as obtaining and retaining diverse and representative faculty, but also are questions concerning the nature of research both within and outside of these institutions. The examination of questions of equity often becomes contested ground as differences emerge among the various stakeholders who are involved

Thus, for many years, the preponderance of research focusing on people of color has been done by White, middle class investigators, with the result that much of the research focusing on populations defined as marginal takes a deficit approach to its subjects: it raises questions that focus on the pathologies and problems presumed to reside within those under study. Consigned by these interpretations to the margins, researchers from disenfranchised populations find themselves silenced, or only listened to if they frame their ideas in language that is familiar and comfortable for those in the center (Turner, 2002; Winkler, 1986).

Research on women by feminist researchers addresses issues of marginality, however, women researchers of color frequently have not been included in these discussions. Indeed, it has been noted that the emphasis on interpersonal competition among researchers, along with the racist ori-

entation of the academic environment has meant that some feminist researchers, in pursuit of their own professional development, have adopted mainstream approaches that marginalize women of color (Houston, 1991).

Although active, productive researchers, who are members of marginalized groups, exist, they are rarely consulted or their work acknowledged. Moreover, when the work is acknowledged, it is frequently characterized as worthwhile only to the degree to which the research moves both the researcher and the population studied from the margins to the center. Yet, the work of marginalized researchers is unique precisely because it is embedded with the cultural and social perspectives of those researchers. These standpoints, often not easily accessible to researchers from the center, are notable because they provide information about alternative ways to ask questions, define issues, organize research agendas and interpret research findings (Allen, 1995; Essed, 1996; Ropers-Huilman & Costner, 1998).

Similarly, women of color who are researchers provide a particular perspective emanating from the intersections of race or ethnicity and gender that have ramifications for their work. Such viewpoints can be useful to all researchers seeking to conduct investigations about diverse populations. At a time when multiple lenses and perspectives are needed to develop more effective policies and practices in educational institutions that serve diverse populations, it is critical to find common ground between Center and Margin research discourse.

The purpose of this book is to examine perspectives from a diverse group of women of color who are educational researchers. We have chosen to examine these perspectives by centering the discussion *within* the Margin rather than *from* the Center. In other words, we have deliberately chosen the Margin as the site of discourse in order to provide an opportunity for readers to understand the various perspectives taken by women of color when they implement their investigations. In addition, we provide an opportunity for a researcher from the Center to discuss the impact of the perspectives of women of color who are researchers on her work. We believe, that by situating the perspective of the book within the margins, we are providing an alternative to the dominant perspective in educational research, which uses its power to determine who shall be centered and who marginalized. We see these margins not as deficient areas from which we need to escape, but rather as legitimate sites where useful knowledge has been and will continue to be generated.

In 1999, we organized a symposium for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting entitled, "From Center to

Margins: The Importance of Self-Definition in Research.” The impetus for this symposium came from conversations between ourselves and other women of color who are educational researchers in the academy. A consistent theme of these conversations concerns our continuing quest to integrate our skills as researchers (trained in dominant and mainstream traditions), with our experiences as women of color in understanding and interpreting the experiences of those (including ourselves) who are marginalized by these very traditions. We felt this symposium would contribute to an understanding of the quest of researchers of color for constructed knowledge, one that moves outside the frames and systems offered in dominant interpretations to provide and create our own analyses of experiences on the margins. Furthermore, we argue that knowledge construction such as this can become a prime location for resisting objectification as the Other even as it becomes the catalyst for evolving more authentic and inclusive paradigms.

To organize the symposium, we asked three women of color researchers to provide their own perspectives on their work as researchers in their respective communities. The researchers include an African American, a Latina, and a First Nation member. In addition, we asked a researcher who represents the center to respond.

To frame the symposium, we asked the researchers of color to focus on the question, “How do we come to know what we know about our research?” In responding to this broad question, the researchers told some of their stories as scholars situated in the margins. From these perspectives, they described some of the factors, issues, and concerns that guided them as they moved from the initial steps of framing research questions, through designing and implementing studies, and to interpreting results and deciding how and where to disseminate results. Following these presentations, our respondent discusses how she had to move away from the Center to understand the perspectives of researchers who have been marginalized.

The presentations at this symposium, and the positive and enthusiastic responses from the large and diverse audience, indicate a strong interest in the perspectives presented, and in particular, the concept of situating the dialogue in the margins where researchers of color reside. The participants and audience reacted positively to the integration of race, gender, and, in some instances, class inherent in these presentations. Based on this experience, we decided to expand the symposium into the present volume.

Overview of the Book

Chapter 1 provides a historical and contemporary context for the work of women of color educational researchers. Pollard reviews the litera-

ture to reveal the pioneering work of women in these communities whose research is often ignored or dismissed. In addition, she analyzes the perspectives others have taken on women of color as researchers and the responses these women have had to these views from the Center. In chapters 2, 3 and 4, Rains, Curry, and Nieto tell their own unique stories of attempts to conduct their research and how they came to their particular epistemological stances. In chapters 5 and 6, Pang and Irvine discuss how they put their own epistemological stances into practice in both their research and their work with students and teachers. In chapter 7, Maxine Green, a distinguished White woman researcher, discusses how her own research perspective has been affected by her attempts to move away from the Center and understand the perspectives of researchers who have been marginalized. Finally, in chapter 8, Welch summarizes the perspectives of the contributors and integrates their perspectives with the historical information provided earlier in the book. She uses this summary to provide an alternative context for considering the margins of educational research. In particular, rather than seeing the margins as providing information that can only be either assimilated to the center or discarded, the margins are seen as viable epistemological sites that are essential and necessary, not only for the researchers, but also the communities from which they come. Furthermore, the margins represent spaces that cannot and should not be appropriated or contested by the hegemonic center. We end with suggestions for promoting a climate in the general research community that recognizes and appreciates the valuable roles women of color play in informing researchers, policy makers, and practitioners about supporting equity in education.

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